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Analysis | Despite Gaza, Netanyahu Is Topping the Polls in Israel Again. He Should Thank Iran

Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu is enjoying an unbelievable, if not unbearable, recovery in the polls, despite Israel's dire diplomatic and security situation. In cold campaign terms, his management of the Gaza war and the drawn-out hostage crisis is a losing issue – but there's salvation in Tehran

Dahlia Scheindlin Aug 19, 2024 8:46 pm IDT 🔔 Follow





Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House last month: Israelis are re-crowned him as king – or at least as king of the polls Credit: Elizabeth Frantz/ REUTERS

An Israeli expression holds that you must "rub your eyes" at the sight of something that is at once unbearable and incomprehensible.

Israel is experiencing its longest war, which began with the bloodiest, most sovereignty-compromising attack in its history. Its economy, reputation and mental and moral health are hurtling towards perdition. Security is abysmal, with fighting in Gaza ongoing, daily rocket and drone fire from Lebanon, terror attacks and the possible return of suicide bombings within the Green Line. And the country is on the precipice of its first-ever direct war with Iran, or possibly with Hezbollah.

Yet this is the moment Israelis re-crowned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as king – that is, king of the polls.

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On Friday, August 9, for the first time since the start of the war, the weekly Maariv poll conducted by Dr. Menachem Lazar found Netanyahu's Likud would win in a party vote if elections were held that day. Netanyahu also hit another landmark, coming in first place with 42 percent in a head-to-head question about whether he or National Unity party leader Benny Gantz is best suited to be prime minister. Gantz, who left Netanyahu's war cabinet [in June](#) to return to the opposition, was chosen by 40 percent of respondents.

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National Unity party leader Benny Gantz, last month. Credit: Oren Ben Hakoona

These findings aren't an anomaly. In Maariv's survey a week later, on August 16, Netanyahu's Likud once again won the top spot, one seat ahead of National Unity. Netanyahu won again in a head-to-head question against Gantz, though this time by just one point.

But the real reason to pay attention is that Netanyahu's polling breakout is consistent with a longer, drawn-out recovery since April.

For the first six months after October 7, polls for Netanyahu and his government were a disaster. Likud lost as much as half of its support relative to the elections, and coalition parties hit a low of 42 seats, relative to 64 today, or about one third of their support. But from early [April](#), several polls showed stabilization or even a [slight uptick](#). In a [June survey](#) for Israel's public broadcaster, Kan, Netanyahu's personal ratings had climbed six

points since the broadcaster's January findings – a big deal in polling terms.

Earlier qualifications about election polling remain in order. In both Maariv surveys, Likud barely squeaked past Gantz's National Unity party, with a lead that is within the margin of error; the same is true for his lead in the personal match-up question. And elections are too far off for the findings to say anything meaningful about the future. Speculation about potential new parties is pervasive and headlines often focus on the victory of nonexistent parties.

The bottom line is that Netanyahu's current governing coalition parties are still far from gaining a majority in any poll (leaving aside Netanyahu's crony pollster, Direct Polls). Together, the current coalition parties are stuck at 50–54 seats out of 120, just like their pre-war polls.



Hostage families and other protesters rally against the Netanyahu-led government in Tel Aviv, this month. Credit: Itai Ron

But what today's numbers show is that Netanyahu is winning back some of his old, remarkably enduring support. What could have happened both in early April and in early August to

generate watershed progress in his post-war poll recovery? All evidence points to Iran.

On April 2, Israel assassinated Mohammad Zahedi, the Iranian Quds Force commander, in Damascus. When I analyzed the very early polling improvements on April 9, Israelis didn't yet know that Iran was going to respond by attacking Israel directly only days later. When Iran was poised to respond, Israel rallied an international coalition of Western and Arab allies that would have been unthinkable barely a decade earlier, and together they repelled Iran's attack in an impressive military and diplomatic feat. Netanyahu almost made it look easy.

When it was over, by late April, Netanyahu saw his best polls since the start of the war to date. A plurality of Israelis of all political camps in an Israel Democracy Institute survey thought Israel had the strategic upper hand over Iran. In Lazar's weekly polls for Maariv, Likud rose two seats after the Iran strike on Israel, and stayed up, while the coalition parties' total number (without Gantz's National Unity) rose five seats and stayed put.

A Channel 13 survey from April 21 discovered an interesting fact: Over two-thirds of Israelis did not believe Netanyahu's declaration that Israel was "just a step away from victory" – his big lie about the Gaza war. But when the poll asked about far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, who had mocked him over Israel's response to Iran, a clear plurality backed Netanyahu. It's a simple insight: Iran worked for Netanyahu in the polls, while in campaign terms, his management of the Gaza war is a losing issue. And Netanyahu is always campaigning.

Now consider August. New surveys by two Israeli think tanks, the Israel Democracy Institute and the Institute for National Security Studies, offer sobering reflections of how bad Israelis feel about everything else. The proportion of Israelis who are

optimistic about national security in IDI's polls is just 26 percent, a new low and half of the rate it was two years ago. In the INSS survey, even the IDF is seeing declining trust and even among the Jewish population: 78 percent of Israeli Jews said they trust it. That's high, but very long-term trends are usually higher. [IDI polling in June 2023 and mid-October](#) found that 86 and 87 percent of Jewish Israelis, respectively, trusted the Israeli army.



Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and IDF Chief of Staff Herzl Halevi attend a memorial ceremony at the Mount Herzl Military Cemetery in Jerusalem, July 16. Credit: Abir Sultan/Reuters

In the IDI survey, "a record high of 62.5 percent of Israelis define the overall situation as bad or very bad, while a record low of 12 percent characterize it as good or very good; 25 percent say it is "so-so."

In the INSS survey, a dismal 17 percent show trust in the government, and just 26 percent give Netanyahu favorable ratings (31 percent among Jews and just 7 percent of Arab respondents) when assessed on his own as compared to a political match-up.

With everything so negative, the war in Gaza dragging on, the hostages suffering and dying, there are only two developments in recent weeks that Israelis might have seen as positive: the assassination of a top Hezbollah operative that Israel proudly claimed responsibility for in Beirut, and the assassination Israelis liked even better, of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in the heart of Tehran. Israelis probably even like Israel's coy evasiveness about its role in the latter's death.

Such assassinations have a terribly mixed record, and often cause enemy groups to grow back stronger. Ronen Bergman's book, "Rise and Kill First," raises this issue in his meticulous and gripping historical analysis. But given their despondent attitudes, Israelis might have traded the insights for a desperate need to score points and show strength.

In other words, for Netanyahu, Iran is a winning issue.

It's a shame Netanyahu seems mostly disinterested in the other highly consistent poll findings, including one from just a few days ago, in which an N12 survey found that a strong, 63 percent majority of Israelis support the "hostage deal currently being discussed in Qatar," – the question didn't mention the cease-fire tradeoff – compared to just 12 percent, five times less, who were opposed. The remainder didn't know whether they supported or opposed it, and they're more honest in a way. No one truly knows the details being discussed.

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But the findings here too have been consistent: Pretty much from the start of the war, the majority or plurality of Israelis

want the hostages to return through a deal, even at the "cost" of a cease-fire.

It's not all up to Netanyahu – Hamas knows very well how to say no and has done so numerous times. But Netanyahu has also done plenty to avoid sealing a deal. Maybe his poll recovery will make him feel confident enough to take a risk, and not only with Iran. And maybe the thought of earning still more good polling numbers, should he reach a deal, will get through to him in a way the lives of the hostages have not.

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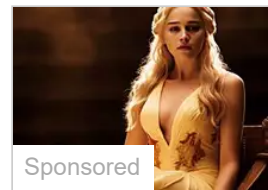


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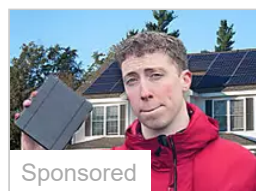
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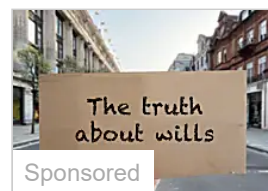


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